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Beyond Spheres of Influence: the myth of the state and Russia's seductive power in Kyrgyzstan

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This paper questions the analytical value of 'spheres of influence' for understanding power and the state in the post-Soviet region and beyond, based on a critical deconstruction of the ontological and epistemological assumptions inherent in the concept. It proposes an alternative reading of power and the state, drawing on the concept of 'seductive power' at a distance and Timothy Mitchell's 'state effect'. Rather than 'sphere of influence', a highly politicized concept conveying an ontology that flattens and divides space, essentializes the state and relies on an intentionalist account of power, we need an analytical framework that can help us make sense of the multiple, varied spatialities and historical legacies that produce the state and power. I demonstrate this through an extended discussion of Russian power in Kyrgyzstan, a country often described as a Russian client state. Mobilizing recent re-conceptualizations of state and power in anthropology and political geography, I present an analysis of Russia's seductive power in Kyrgyzstan and the way it contributes to producing Kyrgyz state-ness. I also show how Russia's Great Power myth is itself evolving and conclude that the differentiated, relational production of space and power in either Kyrgyz or Russian myths of the state is not captured by a 'return to spheres of influence'.

Introduction

When Russian plans for a Eurasian economic community were first announced in 2012, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton lashed out at the Kremlin's 'attempts to re-Sovietize' the former Soviet space; as she ominously put it, 'We know what the goal is and we are trying to figure out ways to slow down or prevent it'.¹ Ever since, the idea that Russia's Great Power identity is necessarily associated with seeking a sphere of influence in the 'Near Abroad' has been gaining currency.² This association is nevertheless debatable. The question is not simply whether Russia has a sphere-of-influence policy in the former Soviet Union (FSU), or whether such a policy can succeed. The core meaning of the concept of 'sphere of influence' contains specific and very familiar assumptions about state, space and power, not least in its essentialization of bounded, exclusionary space and a narrow reading of power.³

These assumptions are problematic as a lens with which to understand Russia's enduring influence the post-Soviet space.

As Susanna Hast has rightly highlighted, some of this is a normative issue, reflecting the way that the concept and associated norms have become delegitimized during decolonization and the ideological sphere-of-influence policies of the Cold War.⁴ However, this article has a different focus, casting a critical light on the return of 'Spheres of Influence' as an analytical concept. As I will argue, ontologies of state, space and power inherent in the meaning of the concept cannot grasp the complex historical legacies and ongoing processes of post-Soviet state reconstruction. They 'flatten' the multiple, ambivalent logics of state and space that result from these processes and impose a linear, causal understanding of power as control. In other words, the static ontologies conveyed by the concept do not help us to understand state power operating across space, or the reproduction of 'the state' in these operations. As a result, the 'return of Spheres of Influence' narrative produces an impoverished and somewhat misleading account of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space.

The concept 'sphere of influence' is strongly associated with what John Agnew has called the modern geopolitical imagination.⁵ At its core is the 'Westphalian myth', an understanding of state space as fixed and bounded that is associated with classical geopolitics and Realist approaches in International Relations.⁶ An extensive literature both in IR and in critical geopolitics has deconstructed the spatial assumptions inherent in this depiction of the state, not least in response to the global spread of a (neo)liberal disposition that seemed to erase Westphalian statehood after the end of the Cold War.⁷ Nevertheless, the Westphalian myth of the state remains a suggestive image, and has most recently made a comeback in narratives of 'rising Great Powers' and a 'return of geopolitics' – the latter explicitly or implicitly referencing the assumptions of classical geopolitics, especially the British geographer Halford Mackinder.⁸ One example of this are binary accounts of Russia jostling with the US and latterly China for influence in Kyrgyzstan, a country that used to be depicted as a Western-leaning 'island of democracy' in Central Asia, but now is more often described as a Russian 'client state'.⁹ These kinds of accounts do not capture the persistence and limitations of Russian influence in the region or the particular context

in which it is perpetuated. Post-Soviet states, including Russia, have been produced in a complex interplay of state disintegration and reconfiguration, reflecting the ambiguous legacies of Soviet statehood as well as the (neo-)liberal global juncture of the 1990s and 2000s. All these factors combine in producing a variety of spatial logics underpinning performances of ‘the state’.

This emphasis on performance implies an analytical move towards thinking about the state as produced in symbols and practices, including discursive practices. In Timothy Mitchell’s influential formulation, this is the state not as the source, but an effect of power, a ‘state effect’ produced in ever evolving performances.¹⁰ In this, power relations matter. However, they are not the linear reading of power as exclusive control over territory associated with spheres of influence. Instead, this is power at a distance, ‘seductive power’ that works to produce particular political subjectivities and is effective precisely because it draws on mutually constitutive understandings of state and space.¹¹ This article draws on understandings of the state as effect, myth and performance to critically interrogate the assumptions that drive the return of ‘Spheres of Influence’ as an analytical concept. It does so by showing how a particular post-Soviet kind of state-ness, and with this, Russian seductive power, is produced in discourse and practices between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. This ‘state effect’ is characterized by an ambivalent interplay of open and bounded representations of political space and a de-territorialized, embodied meaning of sovereignty. I draw on a series of interviews, conducted with Kyrgyz experts, businesspeople, MPs and social activists in Bishkek in 2013 and 2016, as well as media sources and recent secondary literature, to explore these logics of space and power in the relationship between Russia and Kyrgyzstan.¹² The article first discusses the assumptions about space, state and power inherent in the concept of Sphere of Influence. It then shows how shared conceptions of state and space, as well as material factors such as enduring networks at both elite and societal level, (re)produce Russian power in Kyrgyzstan in a way that is fundamentally at odds with the ontological and epistemological assumptions evoked by ‘spheres of influence’. Thinking through the state as myth and performance allows us a richer understanding of the variable geographies of power that come into play in the relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. It also captures how political power is legitimized through the myth of the state in the region. This is true for the relational production of sovereignty in Kyrgyzstan, but also affects the Russian myth

of the state as Great Power. The concept ‘Spheres of Influence’ cannot grasp these complexities and thus obscures more than it reveals about Russian power in the post-Soviet space.

Spheres of influence and Great Games in the ‘heartland’

As Susanna Hast has pointed out, ‘when we go looking for a theoretical conceptualization of what a sphere of influence is, we will find a debate on the role of the state’.¹³ This is not just because the concept is explicitly linked to the statecraft of imperial powers in the latter half of the 19th century. Modern, Westphalian representations of statehood revolve around the ‘territorial trap’, thinking the state as an autonomous agent constituted by an inexorable link between sovereign power and exclusive control over bounded territory.¹⁴ These assumptions are also reproduced in dominant understandings of ‘Sphere of Influence’. Unlike hegemony or soft power, concepts that also seek to express the idea of an external influence by means other than the use of force, the concept ‘sphere of influence’ is explicitly spatial in nature, and the spatial imagination that underpins it is unambiguously Westphalian in its depiction of power over space as exclusionary control, exercised by autonomous state-agents.

As a concept of diplomatic practice, ‘sphere of influence’ reflected the dominance of the imperial Great Powers and their global competition for space, not least in the early 20th century ‘Great Game’ between the British and Russian empires in Central Asia.¹⁵ One of the specific meanings of the concept at the time was its delineation in direct negotiation between imperial powers, without any agency for the influenced states and territories.¹⁶ This was connected to a conception of space that foregrounded boundedness and exclusion, as in aspirations to the *exclusive* influence of one Great Power over a clearly delineated territory. Thus, in the 1907 Anglo-Russian convention formalizing Russian and British spheres of influence in Central Asia, Afghanistan was described as a sovereign state “outside the sphere of Russian influence,” and committed to conduct all its external relations “through the intermediary of His Britannic Majesty’s Government”.¹⁷

The Great Game reflected the rise of geopolitical narratives as deterministic explanations of world politics.¹⁸ A few years before the Anglo-Russian convention,

Halford Mackinder formulated a direct connection between spheres of influence in Central Asia and a global balance of power. He designated Central Eurasia (broadly speaking present day Central Asia as well as Russia east of the Ural mountains) as the 'heartland', the 'geographical pivot of history' whose control promised world domination.¹⁹ This kind of geopolitical determinism describes world politics as zero-sum competition for control over territory, whether directly (empire or military occupation) or indirectly (spheres of influence). It also contains an ontology of Great Powers as quintessentially Westphalian sovereign subjects: unitary, strategic actors defined by an ability to project power in space, be it by military means or 'statecraft'.²⁰ This focus on direct agreements between Great Powers, competition for exclusive space, a causal view of power as control achieved through the deployment of tools of statecraft, and the writing out of the agency of smaller states has remained at the core of the concept, even as it became de-legitimized as an international norm after the first World War.²¹ In fact, its disappearance from the acceptable vocabulary of international relations did not mean the end of spheres of influence. On the contrary, the de-legitimation and increasing politicization of the term went hand in hand with the continued practice of sphere-of-influence policies by the superpowers during the Cold War. The fixation and division of space represented by the concept was deepened by the addition of a new element – ideological enmity and thus the fixation of difference at a much deeper, totalizing, level.²² De facto Soviet and American spheres of influence were asserted by the transformation of the totality of society into communist or capitalist systems. This was bounded space as container, not of a 'domestic' of no concern to understanding the international, but of clearly articulated and irreconcilable difference.

After the Cold War, the language of geographical determinism remains an enduring trope in commentary on Russia.²³ Long before Russia's 2008 use of force in Georgia and the current standoff with the West over Russian meddling in Ukraine, a return to classical geopolitical imagery underpinned the re-emergence of the 'Great Game' metaphor and the popularity of Mackinder's vision of the 'Heartland' in analyses of post-Soviet Central Asia, both within and outside the region.²⁴ A typical example is the way that the US airbase in Manas, close to Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek (and to Russia's military base in Kant), has been presented as the focus of a 'Great Game' between Russia and the US over dominance in Kyrgyzstan, with accounts of Russia's

power shifting quite radically in a matter of months, depending on the perceived state of the ‘game’.²⁵ Thus, the Kremlin was said to be losing influence when Russian pressure failed to close the Manas airbase in 2009; nine months later, Russian influence in Kyrgyz politics was deemed so strong that it was able to orchestrate a popular uprising that overthrew the government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev that had denied its request. The final closure of the airbase in 2014 and Kyrgyzstan’s accession to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) in 2015 have been read as proof that Kyrgyzstan has moved into a Russian sphere of influence – though a new iteration of the game is said to be already in the making, with Russia’s influence under threat from China’s economic dominance in a struggle between the EEU and the Chinese One Road One Belt project.²⁶

This reflects some of the problems with ‘spheres of influence’ and the ‘new Great Game’ as an analytical lens. The latter concept has been extensively critically dissected elsewhere and need not be re-examined here. Alex Cooley and others have highlighted the considerable agency of local elites and their ability to negotiate with and even manipulate the Great Powers, as well as critiquing the assumption of a strategy of exclusive dominance in Central Asia by Russia and other outside players.²⁷ These critiques raise important points, but they ultimately do not break with the geopolitical imagination underlying the narrative of a ‘return of spheres of influence’. They remain wedded to ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of the state and power that determine the questions they ask: about the intentions of actors, or the success or failure of policy strategies. This closes down pathways for understanding the dynamics of state, space and power in the relationship between Russia and the states of post-Soviet Central Asia. These relations are taking place in a particular historical context, locally and globally, that highlights the point made by Agnew about the static ontology of the ‘territorial trap’: it produces an image of the state that has never been more than a historically contingent idea.²⁸ The influx of classical geopolitical tropes, and in particular the return of ‘spheres of influence’ as an analytical lens, obscure the multiple ways in which imperial and Soviet legacies - and the ambivalences of state and space that result from them - produce power, space and the state in the region.

State and space in the post-Soviet myth of the state

Reading the state with Timothy Mitchell as ‘the powerful, apparently metaphysical effect of practices’ (including discursive practices) refocuses analysis away from transhistorical ‘geopolitical truths’ towards the historical and cultural contingency of the way the state is performed.²⁹ It also means that we should not assume ‘the state’ as a coherent, autonomous, easily legible entity. In fact, it is precisely the absence of these attributes that can be captured by thinking about the state as effect – the ambivalences and tensions created as ‘the state’ is produced in different relations at different sites, in actions by state officials as well as in the experiences of its inhabitants.³⁰ If there was any doubt that Mitchell’s ‘state effect’ is more than just a theoretical move, the experience of state collapse and state reconstruction in the former Soviet space – including Russia – provides ample evidence to the contrary. Discourses of ‘strong stateness’ are pervasive both in Russia and in Central Asia.³¹ As John Heathershaw put it, this is a ‘statist imaginary where the centre of power is both dispassionately distant and fantastically almighty’, imagined as provider of stability and pastoral care for its population.³² At the same time, political power in the region is characterized by the dominance of informal practices in networks of ‘statespeople’, with the blurring of boundaries between public and private and the hijacking of state structures as source of private revenue a frequent result.³³ These ambiguities are exceptionally visible in Kyrgyzstan, where, as Madeleine Reeves put it, ‘the very *location* of state authority is up for grabs’ and where informal clientelistic relations often take the place of institutional structures.³⁴ The resulting widespread ineffectiveness and arbitrariness of state organs, and the repeated inaction of the state in situations of outright fragmentation of political space and violent conflict, mean that discourses of strong state-ness are often ill-matched to the way the state is experienced by its inhabitants.³⁵

The tension between these experiences of the state and images of state strength circulating in the region has been described as a ‘paradox’.³⁶ However, the persistence of discourses of the strong, autonomous state also highlights how ‘the state’ operates as a myth that is enacted by post-Soviet state elites to legitimize their claims to power, in sometimes spectacular performances.³⁷ Thomas Hansen and Finn Stepputat have called this the ‘mythical dimension’ of the modern state, the state as a ‘social fantasy’ legitimizing the power of those claiming to speak in its name. As they emphasize, languages of stateness are ‘localized meanings, genealogies and trajectories’

expressive of a particular context rather than simple variants of a universal form.³⁸ This mythical dimension of the modern state also has a diachronic dimension, projecting past meanings, shaped in past experiences, into the present.³⁹ This is particularly visible when it comes to understandings of sovereignty, claims to legitimate political authority associated with the state. Sovereignty is one of the oldest concepts in the political vocabulary, resonant with meanings of embodied sovereign subjectivity that predate its Westphalian focus on territorial boundedness. In the Russian myth of the state, the embodiment of the sovereign subject in an actual person, the tsar, remained explicitly part of understandings of '*samoderzhavie*' (autocracy) until the end of the Russian empire in 1917.⁴⁰ Soviet conceptions of sovereignty included a strong understanding of sovereign territoriality in the way that its border and in particular the boundary with the West established absolute difference and was almost impenetrable for ordinary citizens. A territorial conception also underpinned the sovereignty of the individual republics of the Soviet Union (which became the successor states after 1991). The Kyrgyz SSR, as well as all the other Soviet republics with the exception of Russia, was granted sovereignty on the basis of the principle of ethno-territoriality – homelands of a primordially defined nation.⁴¹ However, within the USSR, understandings of sovereignty were more ambivalent, effectively departing from the Westphalian idea of sovereignty as exclusive control over territory. Thus, Soviet legal discourse formulated a sovereignty 'surplus' in relations between the Union republics and the Soviet centre, effectively a 'doubling-up' of sovereignty claims on the same territory.⁴² This was a reflection of even more pronounced ambivalences of sovereign power in political practice, introduced by the dissociation of political authority from the structures of the territorial state and its location in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.⁴³

In the post-Soviet myth of the state circulating between Russia and Kyrgyzstan, conceptions of sovereignty take a prominent place, as do representations of space. But as will be seen in the next section, these understandings cannot be reduced to the meaning of bounded territorial sovereignty that appears to be the model for the many conscious elite-led attempts at state- and nation-building in Central Asia.⁴⁴ The space of the former Soviet Union is the product of two ambivalently intertwined processes – the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reconfiguration of those imperial relations that were preserved (albeit radically reinterpreted) in the Soviet multinational state.

These processes have produced associated logics of spatial ordering, one of which is the continuing ambivalent interplay of openness and closure of political space between Russia and the new states of the FSU. As Nick Megoran has shown, bordering practices have been widespread in post-independence Kyrgyzstan, with regard to neighbouring countries as well as between ethnic groups.⁴⁵ However, at the same time, spatial ambivalences persist between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. It is well known that the states of the former Soviet Union habitually continue to be called the 'Near Abroad' (*blizhnee zarubezh'e*) in Russian public political discourse.⁴⁶ However, this does not mean that Russia has re-emerged as a Westphalian, bordered sovereign subject, while the 'weak' new states of the FSU are forced to adopt a spatial logic of openness towards it, in the manner of the colonizer crossing the 'smooth surface' of a space wide open to be conquered.⁴⁷ 'Boundless space' (*beskrainiaia zemlia*) is an old trope in Russian representations of state space, but it is linked as much to experiences of vulnerability of territory as it is to the history of a rapidly expanding land empire whose borders were never fixed.⁴⁸ In Kyrgyzstan, 25 years after independence, a similar blurring of the boundary between domestic and foreign can be traced when it comes to representations of Russia.⁴⁹ This was reflected in interviews in both 2013 and 2016. Regardless of political stance towards Russia, Kyrgyz interviewees did not describe Russia as distant and foreign – as a human rights activist critical of Russian involvement in Kyrgyzstan put it in 2016, 'they are still ours (*nashi*)'. A UN employee, more positively disposed towards the Kremlin, put it more bluntly: 'you have to understand: they are not foreign to us'. Another interviewee, a democratic activist also very critical of Russian involvement, claimed that 'we are just a Russian province (*guberniia*)'.⁵⁰ This chimes with observations that 'cultural closeness' is a persistent factor in Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan.⁵¹ A Kyrgyz political expert in 2013 blamed this closeness for what he saw as the problematic pervasive influence of Russia: 'Our population is very pro-Russian – if you ask people, they say 'yes, they are our brothers, sure'. If the attitudes were different, our politicians would be able to 'play games' with Russia.'⁵²

All of this matters for understanding Russian power in Kyrgyzstan. The openness of imagined space between Russia and Kyrgyzstan is not just an additional factor of 'soft power'. It fundamentally constitutes both the persistence and the limitations of Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan. Whether the relationship between Russia and

Kyrgyzstan is read as predominantly post-Soviet or post-imperial/post-colonial, it is clear that at its core is a vast disparity of power that is expressed not only materially but also in cultural production. However, this disparity does not translate into all-pervasive Russian control. Instead, Russian power is best understood as dependent on, and productive of, dispositions and political subjectivities constituted in the relationship itself.⁵³ The ‘state effect’ contains an account of power as the effect of performances. In a similar vein, John Allen has proposed a conception of power at a distance. This is power understood as a series of ‘relational effects’, constituted in social interaction and always mediated in space and time; as he put it, power ‘is not some thing or attribute; it cannot be possessed as resources can; and it does not travel’.⁵⁴ Resources, be they material or normative, matter for the exercise of power – but power is only present in concrete, situated relations.⁵⁵ Thinking about power in this way is an ontological move away from an understanding of power as inherent in separate entities to a processual understanding in which power is relationally produced and only ever appears in its production.

This means that power is not control by one (collective) actor over another, as the ‘sphere of influence’ narrative suggests. Instead, it is constitutive of and dependent on political subjectivities on both sides. As Allen argues, this is particularly the case for the relational effect of power as ‘seduction’, a prevalent form of power at a distance, and as I will suggest below, a concept that captures Russian power in Kyrgyzstan. Seduction relies on suggestion and works on ‘attitudes and values that are already present, leaving open the possibility of rejection or indifference...[this] gives it considerable reach, yet at the same time curbs its intensity’.⁵⁶ This reading of power at a distance formulates space as ‘an emergent product of relations’, ‘forever incomplete and in production’, as Doreen Massey has put it.⁵⁷ By foregrounding the issue of distance, it also problematizes space, and interpretations of space, as a central element in the production of power. As will be seen below, Kyrgyz understandings of the openness of state space between Russia and Kyrgyzstan are grounded both in material practices and in discourse, in particular representations of *state-ness* and associated norms circulating between the two countries. Russian seductive power thus revolves around a regionally shared myth of the state that itself contains an account of openness of space – but its reach and intensity relies on seduction and is not captured by a narrative of ‘sphere of influence’.

Russia and Kyrgyzstan: performing the state effect, producing seductive power

Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan has been associated with the rent-seeking of local elites.⁵⁸ Since Russia's re-engagement in the region in the early 2000s, there has been a steady flow of Russian loans, investment promises and debt relief, not least in attempts to persuade Kyrgyz elites to close down the US airbase in Manas and in the run-up to Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EEU.⁵⁹ Russian financial promises are no match for the ever-increasing volume of Chinese investments in the country, especially as they are all too frequently downsized or abandoned.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, they are one form of revenue and hence seduction for Kyrgyz elites, all the more so after the substantial rent paid by the US for leasing the Manas airbase ended in 2014. Elites also profit from their Russian connections in the way in which post-Soviet business networks between Russia and Kyrgyzstan and global offshore havens combine to produce and maintain a de-territorialized 'offshore state'.⁶¹ In a well-known example, Maxim Bakiev, the president's son, was engaged in an profitable scheme involving Russian and American intermediaries, smuggling fuel from a Gazprom-owned Russian refinery to supply the US airbase.⁶² However, material entanglements are not just about personal profit or rent-seeking. Rather, broader economic interdependences, in conjunction with a shared myth of the state, reproduce relational space between Russia and Kyrgyzstan and in turn produce Russian seductive power.

Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EEU in 2015 has been taken as an illustration of the power of Russian statecraft. In this account, bribes and blackmailing drove Kyrgyz elites to join the organization against Kyrgyzstan's own economic best interests.⁶³ It is true that the EEU has not yet led to deeper economic integration, and there continue to be problems with the implementation of agreed transit rules into Kazakhstan in particular.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, concrete economic interdependencies in trade, but above all migration, are widely cited by Kyrgyz experts as a valid reason for accession, even where they are otherwise critical of Russia's relationship with Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁵ About a third of Kyrgyz GDP is dependent on trade relations with Russia, and another third is ascribed to migrant remittances.⁶⁶ About a fifth of Kyrgyzstan's population are labour migrants to Russia, but much wider family networks depend on their income.⁶⁷ Tellingly, even though Kyrgyzstan is the main regional re-export hub for Chinese

goods, and there were legitimate fears that joining the EEU would damage this trade relationship, a large majority of the Kyrgyz population was consistently in favor.⁶⁸ The EEU accession has meant free movement rights for Kyrgyz migrants, making it easy to obtain work permits and reducing the ‘blacklisting’ of overstayers and illegal migrants.⁶⁹ As a result, Kyrgyz migrant numbers to Russia and remittance income have risen significantly since 2015, while numbers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan fell.⁷⁰

These issues hint at a relational construction of the ‘state effect’, consisting in a blurring of the boundaries of state space in the lives of the many Kyrgyz migrants who have acquired Russian citizenship, moving back and forth between the two countries and often developing family links in both.⁷¹ As this illustrates, material factors are not separable from cultural entanglements. These experiences, as well as historical memories and everyday practices, keep a sense of Russia as not-quite-foreign alive, from the significance of WWII commemorations to Kyrgyz identifications with Russian sport teams.⁷² Many local print media are published in Russian, while some major Russian newspapers have Kyrgyz editions. Russian television channels are available in Kyrgyzstan, and the main evening news of Russia’s state channel are among the most trusted and widely watched news sources in the country.⁷³ All of this suggests that social norms, sense-making and interpretations of world events circulate between Russia and Kyrgyzstan. A Gallup poll conducted in 2015 found a 79% public approval rating for Russia’s actions in Ukraine.⁷⁴ Reflecting this, interviewees in 2016 highlighted the extent to which the Russian version of events in Ukraine and current tensions between the US and Moscow is accepted as established fact even among educated elites.⁷⁵

These entanglements are significant for the production of Kyrgyz stateness itself. Representations of *gosudarstvennost*’ (state-ness) – of particular, culturally and historically grounded ‘myths of the state’ – circulate between Russia and Kyrgyzstan, and while there are differences in interpretation, languages of Kyrgyz statehood have Russian origins and reflect Soviet legacies. As discussed above, the post-Soviet ‘myth of the strong state’ means a state able to guarantee unity, stability and order both in Russia and Central Asia. In popular discourse in the region, the myth of the state is often expressed in images of the ‘strong leader’, suggesting a continued resonance of

pre-Westphalian, imperial understandings of sovereignty as located in an embodied subject.⁷⁶ However, Kyrgyzstan is the one state in Central Asia not ruled by such a strongman. Instead, a small number of ‘statespeople’ rotate through political office.⁷⁷ Counter to regional tendencies, and indeed to active Russian pressure, a parliamentary system was introduced in 2010 as a safeguard against the corruption and clientelism of the Bakiev regime – though the informal politics of the country continue to place the president at the core of political power.⁷⁸ Instability and fragile legitimacy is a recurrent feature of Kyrgyz politics, exemplified in the violent overthrow of the first president Askar Akaev in the 2005 ‘Tulip revolution’ and that of his successor (and beneficiary of the Tulip revolution) Bakiev in 2010. The latter event led to unrest and eventually violent conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbek in the ethnically diverse Ferghana valley, especially in Bakiev’s stronghold in the southern city of Osh. Among Kyrgyz commentators, this is described as a lack or absence of Kyrgyz *gosudarstvennost’*, a lack of state-ness visible in the way that the state fails to maintain unity, stability and interethnic harmony.⁷⁹ One aspect of this was the exclusion of Uzbeks from governance structures, not just at the level of political representation in parliament – roles in the local police for example were almost exclusively Kyrgyz and police actions contributed to the ethnic clashes in Osh.⁸⁰

This narrative of fragile state-ness in Kyrgyzstan contains representations of territorial sovereignty. However, these do not simply reproduce Westphalian understandings of bounded territory; instead, Kyrgyz representations of state space reveal multiple, ambivalent layers of meaning, differentiated in response to local lived experience as well as in relation to different outside actors. Conceptions of bounded territory underpin official and some popular representations of border issues with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and indeed the way the city of Osh is perceived by its inhabitants in the aftermath of the ethnic clashes of 2010.⁸¹ Other representations of a bounded Kyrgyz territory under threat from outside actors emerge in popular conspiracy narratives about the influx of a ‘flood’ of Chinese traders intent on settling in Kyrgyzstan, outnumbering its small population, or the contentious issue of a long lease for resorts around the region’s main tourist destination, lake Issyk-Kul, granted by the Bakiev government to the Kazakh government in 2009.⁸² There is also, increasingly, a discourse of Western encroachment, starting with conspiracy theories about Western manipulation of the Tulip revolution that were promoted by Akaev

himself.⁸³ In the 2010s, this discourse has centered on the presence of the now-defunct US airbase in Manas, Canadian ownership of the country's richest resource, the Kumtor gold mine, and the extent of Western international NGO and donor activity in the country, in particular in the perceived 'meddling' of international agencies in the aftermath of the Osh conflict.⁸⁴ Conceptions of sovereignty as freedom from external domination are also invoked against Russia, for example in public and official discourse around the EEU accession.⁸⁵ However, representations of Kyrgyz statehood imperiled by foreign penetration of space are much less frequent with regard to Russia. Russia's airbase never attracted the kind of controversy that Manas did; during the Osh conflict, the interim government made repeated, but unsuccessful requests for Russian troops to help with the conflict, while both Kyrgyz and Uzbeks appealed to the Russian embassy for support.⁸⁶ Even as a growing Kyrgyz ethno-nationalism has drawn on ideas of Soviet nationalities policy with its exaltation of ethno-territorial statehood, Russian influence is not a main target. As one interviewee put it, "our nationalists don't have a conception of *gosudarstvennost'* (state-ness) that is their own, it is all borrowed [from Russia and the USSR]."⁸⁷

In fact, the role of Russia in Kyrgyz narratives of fragile statehood is much more ambivalent than the simple assertion of Westphalian sovereignty against an outside intruder. In different ways, the performance of Kyrgyz state-ness is dependent on entanglements with Russia, rather than constituted in opposition to it. In spite of the Kremlin's refusal to engage troops in the Osh conflict, military connections are one such area, and not just because Kyrgyzstan regularly participates in joint military exercises in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Kyrgyzstan's joining of the EEU means that contentious borders with Uzbekistan will be reinforced with aid from Russia, including equipment for border guards – the material inscription of territorial conceptions of sovereignty, achieved as part of an institutionalized openness of space between Russia and Kyrgyzstan.⁸⁸ This material support for border forces is part of a wider supply of military hardware and army equipment provided by Russia, equipment that Kyrgyzstan would not have the resources to maintain but that has symbolic value for the Kyrgyz 'myth of the state'. This military support also reproduces networks between the Russian and Kyrgyz armies and security services, as officers are sent to be trained in Moscow.⁸⁹

This is complemented by other practices perpetuating an ambivalent openness towards Russia in the performance of Kyrgyz state-ness. One example is the practice of ‘borrowing’ Russian laws. Kyrgyz laws across a variety of fields are often directly copied from relevant Russian legislation.⁹⁰ This drew international attention when controversial Russian ‘foreign agent’ and ‘LBGT’ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) laws made an appearance in Kyrgyzstan’s parliament, something that has been taken by outside observers as evidence of Russian pressure.⁹¹ The former proposed to increase restrictions on NGOs receiving financing from abroad, while the latter banned ‘LBTG propaganda’. As several of my interlocutors pointed out, the practice of copying laws is very common, a mixture of a lack of sufficiently well-trained civil servants, and the fact that these laws correspond to local norms and perceptions.⁹² At the same time, these ‘travelling laws’ perpetuate a convergence of legal norms and identifications that further underscores Russia’s seductive ‘power at a distance’ in Kyrgyzstan.

In this vein, it is notable that popular conspiracy theories about the extent of Russian power in the country abound, but often have positive connotations.⁹³ This is visible not least in the popular conspiracy theory that had Russia orchestrate the overthrow of Bakiev, who was wildly unpopular in Bishkek and the north of the country by the time of his fall.⁹⁴ A widespread rumor circulated in the aftermath of the Osh conflict in 2010, claiming that Putin was training a new Kyrgyz president who would be parachuted in from Moscow to strengthen Kyrgyz state-ness.⁹⁵ This resonates with a common trope in popular discourse, the interpellation of Putin. At times of political instability, or simply when the Kyrgyz state is experienced as ineffective, statements such as ‘if only Putin was here/our president, these issues would be solved’ are frequent.⁹⁶ These interpellations and conspiracy theories are not just anecdotal; in conjunction with the narrative of fragile statehood in Kyrgyzstan, they tell us something about conceptions of state-ness and the legitimation of power. Kyrgyzstan’s state elites face an ongoing legitimation crisis, which is underpinned by their frequent inability to perform the ‘myth of the state’. As the appeal to Putin shows, this is expressed in popular discourse as the failure to produce a strong leader, the embodied sovereign subject.⁹⁷

All this is reflected in how these imaginations of ‘Russia’ are implicated in the ways

that Kyrgyz statespeople aim to secure their own legitimacy and that of the state they claim to speak for. There is a widespread attempt by Kyrgyz statespeople to publicly perform embodied sovereignty by association with Russian political figures, the closer to Putin the better. In many cases, Kyrgyz political elites enjoy close personal connections with the Kremlin, often reaching back to shared Soviet experiences. While this matters in terms of informal channels of communication, there is a public, performative element to these relationships. Atambaev's alleged personal friendship with Putin was widely displayed in Kyrgyz media.⁹⁸ While the president is the only Kyrgyz politician to directly associate with Putin, Kyrgyz politicians of an array of parties frequently travel to Moscow and show themselves with members of Putin's circle.⁹⁹ This activity spikes before elections; in the past, photographs of Kyrgyz politicians with Kremlin insiders were shown on billboards in election campaigns, until this was outlawed in 2011, amid a controversy that this gave too much of an advantage to a particular, very pro-Russian politician.¹⁰⁰ Another example of this production of sovereignty by association is Kyrgyz membership in regional institutions, including the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the CSTO – and, not least, the EEU. This includes Kyrgyz performance of sovereignty by participating in joint military CSTO exercises; likewise, Kyrgyz political elites participate in the regional phenomenon of 'summit travelling', the proliferation of summits of these institutions, where more often than not little concrete is achieved. However, these summits provide a useful platform for the display of both personal associations and the trappings of sovereign statehood.¹⁰¹

These practices secure legitimate power through association with 'Russia' rather than differentiation from it, in direct contravention to a Westphalian logic of sovereignty. In other words, performing association produces, rather than weakens, the 'state effect'. This can be read as a version of the 'sovereign excess' that has been identified by James D. Sidaway as characteristic for the post-colonial African state.¹⁰² As Sidaway has pointed out, the globally networked African state is secured by 'how [its] sovereignty is rendered intelligible and represented', achieved precisely in international exchange and association in regional communities – a relationally established 'sovereign excess' rather than the delimitation of sovereignty suggested by the Westphalian geopolitical imagination.¹⁰³ While the Kyrgyz myth of the state is situated in a somewhat different post-colonial/post-Soviet context, the above indicates

a similar logic of state-ness produced not in imitation of a European model of statehood but in the performance of different localized meanings of sovereignty, including those reproduced in relations and associations.

Reach and limitations of Russian seductive power

Thus, imaginations of and entanglements with 'Russia' are implicated at the same time in the production of the Kyrgyz 'state effect' and Russian seductive power. What happens when associations are publicly withdrawn, is shown by the most spectacular example of the reach of Russian seductive power in Kyrgyzstan, the role played by the Kremlin in bringing down Bakiev's presidency in 2010. Whether or not this was done to get the US out of Manas, or whether the aim even was to overthrow Bakiev, remains an open question.¹⁰⁴ However, the incident illustrates the operation of Russian 'power at a distance'. By late 2009, public dissatisfaction with a visibly corrupt regime was high.¹⁰⁵ In this context, Russian media started to report negatively on the corrupt business dealings of the Bakiev family, signalling the Kremlin's dissatisfaction to a receptive Kyrgyz audience. The raising of fuel duties in April 2010 added a material incentive to the mix, but the uprising would not have happened had there not been deep-seated dissatisfaction with Bakiev among a large part of the population, and among those political elites not party to his corruption networks.¹⁰⁶ This last point reflects the pervasiveness, but also the limitations of Russian seductive power. There is no causal chain to be uncovered, and perhaps no strategic aim, in the diffuse production of power that helped de-legitimize Bakiev. It emerged relationally, through the complicity of those willingly responding to the seduction. In this, Soviet legacies, representations of openness of space and a shared 'myth of the state' cannot be separated from material entanglements in entrenching Russia's seductive power in Kyrgyzstan.

This example shows the reach of seductive power, but its strength should not be overstated. Seductive power can easily be resisted and subverted, and Kyrgyz political elites have done so on numerous occasions. This has been read as the consequence of the presence of other outside actors, the US and EU, Turkey, and increasingly China, as alternative sources of material benefits.¹⁰⁷ But it should be noted that such subversion has continued in recent years, when the US in particular was disengaging from the country and Western aid was drying up, while the increasing economic

dependence on China stoked fears of Chinese encroachment.¹⁰⁸ Bakiev, for once, resisted Russian pressure to close the Manas airbase, preferring to use Russian threats to extract higher rents from the US.¹⁰⁹ When the new parliamentary constitution was introduced in 2010, this was against the express, and publicly articulated, wishes of the Kremlin.¹¹⁰ The foreign agent law and the LBGT laws, both widely cited as evidence of considerable Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan, were eventually defeated in parliament, after extensive lobbying by civil society actors and NGOs.¹¹¹ Atambaev himself was not simply a ‘pro-Russian’ president, not least because of his exaltation of the 2010 events as ‘revolution’ and obvious identification with the colour revolutions that the Kremlin has so vehemently opposed.¹¹² And while the networked openness of political space between Russia and Kyrgyzstan helps to produce Kyrgyz ‘sovereign excess’ and Russian seductive power, conceptions of Westphalian sovereignty, of closure of such space, can be and are indeed invoked.

Given the reliance of Russian seductive power on shared representations, its durability is also in question. While it has endured through the 1990s, a period when Russia was largely disengaged from the region, it is less clear whether it will stretch into the future. It is unclear what would happen if an anti-Russian narrative emerged as a rallying point for Kyrgyz nationalist mobilization. There are some hints of this, for example in recent Kyrgyz debates on how to commemorate the events of 1916, when an estimated 100,000 Kyrgyz died and others fled to Afghanistan and China opposing a forced draft into the Tsarist army.¹¹³ There is a generational divide in the constitution of political subjectivities, expressed also in the increasing popularity of post-colonial narratives among the second post-Soviet generation.¹¹⁴ Again, this is intertwined with more tangible factors: while many Kyrgyz students continue go to Moscow to study or work, recent years have seen more and more students choosing to study in Asia and the West.¹¹⁵ In addition to the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University, several English-language universities as well as Turkish schools and universities are present in Kyrgyzstan.¹¹⁶ In the face of the internationalization of Kyrgyzstan’s educated youth, the current pervasiveness of Russian seductive power and the relational production of not-quite-foreignness on which it relies, may well turn out to be a Soviet legacy limited by the passing of time.

All this indicates that Russian power in Kyrgyzstan does not conform to images of a

Great Game fought between Great Powers over a passive territory that may be pulled into one or another sphere of influence. This is not simply because local elites can play off different external actors against each other and force them to conform to ‘local rules’, as Alex Cooley has argued.¹¹⁷ The conception of space and state that underpins ‘sphere of influence’ also determines a particular understanding of power: an intentionalist account of one discrete actor trying to exercise control over another – ‘power over’, to use Steve Luke’s well-known typology.¹¹⁸ However, as has been seen above, insofar as Russian power is pervasive and persuasive, it is because the Kyrgyz – state elites and population – are actively involved in its perpetuation. A relationally produced myth of the state secures local legitimacy and the ‘state effect’, complemented by the continued circulation and reproduction of shared norms and understandings. This constitutes a Russian seductive power against which US ‘soft power’ and ‘norm diffusion’ strategies over the years, much more elaborate and much better resourced, have proven relatively ineffective.¹¹⁹

This may not be a specific failure of American soft power strategies, but a broader issue regarding the effectiveness of statecraft as a central element of an intentionalist account of power, especially as the region is seeing a rising groundswell of anti-Americanism.¹²⁰ Likewise, targeted Russian statecraft in Kyrgyzstan appears to have limited effect; the Kremlin cannot control Kyrgyz imaginations of Russia. Russian ‘active measures’ were heavily increased after the 2010 toppling of Bakiev, including the launch of a dedicated Kyrgyz branch of the Russian propaganda channel Sputnik in 2014. Nevertheless, they are generally judged by local interlocutors to be ineffective.¹²¹ The execution of these soft power strategies is often lacklustre, be they the local branch of *Rossotrudnichestvo* (a Russian state agency dedicated to ‘humanitarian cooperation and the support of Russian compatriots abroad’), the financing of pro-Russian NGOs, academic conferences, targeted media outlets or the (widely rumoured) bribing of MPs before elections. David Lewis cites one Kyrgyz commentator who bluntly stated that in elections ‘those who get that money will use it somehow, and then they will quite simply dump Russia’.¹²² Attempts to intervene in the public debate are often heavy-handed; at one Russian-organized academic conference attempting to give a positive spin to the events of 1916, the Kyrgyz participants walked out in the face of what they perceived to be a propaganda event.¹²³ It is noticeable that the negative reporting on Maxim Bakiev in Russian

media in 2009 that helped set the stage for the toppling of his father in 2010 came from news sources not specifically targeting Kyrgyzstan (Russia's Channel 1 main evening news and major Russian newspapers), with reports that were factually correct.¹²⁴

Geopolitical imaginations, the EEU and the Russian myth of the state

This leaves the question whether the EEU which Kyrgyzstan joined in 2015 is the institutionalization of a Sphere of Influence, a 'geopolitical project' which necessarily subjects Kyrgyzstan to an exclusionary spatial logic.¹²⁵ After all, geopolitical narratives resonate in Russia as much as in the West, not least with the rise to prominence of Eurasianist ideologies, and the move of concepts such as 'civilizational geopolitics' from the fringes to the center of official discourse.¹²⁶ The concept of a 'Russian World' (*Russkii Mir*) has acquired new prominence and has been used to justify Russia's interference in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹²⁷ Putin has stated that the EEU draws on pre-existing ties reaching back to the Soviet Union.¹²⁸ At the same time, the Kremlin is clearly seeking a hegemonic position in the post-Soviet space, expressed in official discourse as 'sphere of privileged interests' (*sfera privilegirovannogo interesa*) – a neologism without the strong spatial or normative associations of 'sphere of influence', a term that continues to be avoided in anything but a negative sense.¹²⁹ The upsurge in Russian statecraft, and the Kremlin's use of military force in meddling in 'frozen conflicts' are ample evidence of this attempt to gain influence. However, it has been noted that in official discourse these geopolitical concepts, be it *Russkii Mir* or the growing importance of civilizational discourse are diffuse, ambivalent, a 'fuzzy mental atlas', rather than the exclusionary territorial control evoked by 'sphere of influence'.¹³⁰

Moving away from explicitly geopolitical language, post-Soviet Russian representations of Great Power status do not easily map on the spatial imagery of the modern geopolitical imagination – in line both with the historical resonance of understandings of (*velikaia*) *derzhava* (Great Power) and with a global evolution in the meaning of the concept since the end of the Cold War. Representations and performances of *derzhavnost'* (Great Power-ness) are a central element in Russia's myth of the state.¹³¹ Its oldest and core meaning, widely reproduced in public political discourse, implies *samostaiatel'nost'*, sovereignty not primarily as spatial construct,

but as independence of action, currently associated with the ability to act as a ‘pole’ in an emerging multipolar world order.¹³² This focus on *derzhava* as independent actor-ness, including the use of military force, is by no means limited to Russia, but has been very visible in recent Russian actions. Sovereign independence of action is being publicly performed in spectacular acts, from Georgia, to Crimea, to Syria. However, these performances should not obscure that since the end of the Cold War there has been an evolution in the meaning of ‘Great Power’ in which Russia also participates, and which arguably underpins the geopolitical project of the EEU. While control over space defined Great Power status during high imperialism and the Cold War, this is historically contingent and already in the process of evolving. John Agnew has pointed out how conceptions of primacy started to shift to the economic realm before the end of the Cold War; the economic meta-narrative of globalization has accelerated this trend.¹³³ The myth of the state has proven to be more resilient than suggested by the globalization literature, but the networked nature of the liberal world economy and a perceived need to maintain openness to achieve economic growth is already transforming the spatial assumptions associated with the concept of Great Power.

The ‘rising powers’ discourse, with its central focus on economic potential, has its origins in an acronym (BRICs: Brazil, Russia, India, China) originally coined by a Goldman Sachs report on investment opportunities in emerging economies.¹³⁴ The Kremlin has sponsored an international economic organization of the same name (adding South Africa), which brings together these non-Western ‘rising powers’. In recent years, BRICS has grown from a vague agenda of ‘summit travelling’ into a network of fledgling financial institutions and mechanisms, including a BRICS development bank, a contingent reserve agreement and an alternative BRICS payments system.¹³⁵ Given this new focus on economic success as a key to Great Power status, and Russia’s somewhat precarious status as a ‘rising economy’, it is entirely plausible that the EEU has economic aims rather than representing a hidden agenda to create a sphere of influence.¹³⁶ Originally, the EEU was presented as an integrative project that was aimed at closer association with the EU, China and regional economic organizations in Asia, in the hope of giving Russia a stronger negotiating position as the center of its own regional economic bloc. In Putin’s 2011 article launching the idea, the EEU project was explicitly modeled on EU integration, with a geopolitical imagery that alluded to global openness, not exclusionary closure.

It aimed at developing subsequent links with the EU; as he claimed, ‘entry into the Eurasian Union allows each of its participants more quickly and from stronger positions to integrate into Europe’, aiming for a common economic space ‘from Lisbon to Vladivostok’.¹³⁷ The EEU is a spatial and hence geopolitical project, but this does not automatically make it an attempt to recreate the FSU as an exclusive sphere of influence. Instead, it can be read as underpinning Russia’s attempt at transformation into a contemporary Great Power, holding its own in a world increasingly dominated by regional economic blocs and trade agreements.

The economic viability of the EEU project always hinged on Ukraine’s membership, which then Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich was reluctant to agree to, especially as he was negotiating a EU association agreement at the same time.¹³⁸ Subsequent events are familiar – the Kremlin’s attempts to bribe him into joining the EEU, leading to mass protests in Kiev and the overthrow of Yanukovich in early 2014, followed by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the triggering of new geopolitical faultlines with the West far beyond Ukraine. However, in spite of the Kremlin’s increasingly outspoken rejection of liberal values since the Ukraine conflict, the presentation of the EEU in terms of (neo)liberal tropes and narratives of an economic space networked into the global economy has continued.¹³⁹ This reflects a tradition of contradictory ambivalence in official discourse under Putin, that persists even as the official ‘conservative project’ is broadcast ever more vociferously. Without Ukraine, the EEU may well join a list of failed regional economic integration projects in Central Asia and the FSU; Kyrgyzstan’s troubles with Kazakhstan over EEU customs regulations in 2017, leading to long queues at the border, certainly do not point to the frictionless economic integration the project promised.¹⁴⁰ Diverging economic needs as well as the fallout from Russia’s conflict with the West have caused tensions, and plans for a supranational element mirroring the European Commission are currently suspended.¹⁴¹ In the meantime, however, ‘over 40’ planned free trade agreements with the Asia-Pacific region, China and Israel are heavily promoted by the Kremlin and future integration with the EU continues to be referenced.¹⁴² And while the Kremlin has in the past resisted Chinese proposals for a China-dominated SCO free trade area and development bank, there are also first hints that the EEU could be used as vehicle for integration into such an area.¹⁴³

None of the above should be taken to mean that exclusionary spatial logics are not another, currently very visible, part of the Russian myth of the state. This is performed both in the Kremlin's discourse exalting territorial sovereignty in accordance with the UN Charter, and in its current confrontation with the West in increasingly shrill exhortations of a new Cold War. These issues are intertwined; they highlight the operation of differentiated spatial logics, rather than a single quest for spheres of influence, in Russia's own myth of the state and its performance in relations with the post-Soviet space. Logics of exclusion/self-exclusion in the geopolitical production of 'Russia' in relation to 'the West' (though not a much more ambivalent imagined space of 'Europe') are prominent.¹⁴⁴ This is reflected not least in the use of military force in Ukraine and Georgia, itself a stark illustration of the limits of Russia's seductive power. Ever since the colour revolutions in Georgia and particularly Ukraine in 2003/4, such logics of self-exclusion combine with representations of the openness and vulnerability of state space in narratives of Western encroachment in the post-Soviet space. In reaction to the 2004 Orange revolution, and especially since the 2014 events in Ukraine, such representations are increasingly taking the form of conspiracy theories narrating a pervasive, covert Western statecraft aimed not only at the establishment of an institutionalized, exclusionary Western sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, but also a direct Western threat to Putin's hold on power and the very existence of the Russian state.¹⁴⁵

Events in Kyrgyzstan have never triggered these kinds of exclusionary narratives and performances, not even in the 'game' around the Manas airbase, and certainly not in the 'Tulip revolution' of 2005, where the 'revolutionaries' travelled to Moscow shortly before the event.¹⁴⁶ Russian reactions to the presence of the US in Central Asia were much more ambivalent – and in relation to Afghanistan, often cooperative. When the Kremlin was asked by the Kyrgyz interim government to become militarily involved to help end the conflict in Osh, it declined, unwilling to become embroiled in the complex security situation of the Ferghana valley; here too, there was a degree of cooperation with the US over the issue.¹⁴⁷ China's increased economic engagement in the region, not just Kyrgyzstan, is narrated and performed by the Kremlin in terms of cooperation and interdependence.¹⁴⁸ Contrary to the generalized logics of exclusionary space associated with 'Sphere of Influence', Russian interactions with the post-Soviet space and beyond need to be understood in terms of multiple,

intersecting spatial logics specific to particular relationships.

Conclusion

As the above has shown, the imaginations of space and state at play between Russia and Kyrgyzstan are much more differentiated and ambiguous than a rigid account of spheres of influence as exclusionary spaces suggests. The understanding of power as exclusive control over territory established through strategies of 'statecraft' suggested by this ontology do not capture either the reach or the limitations of Russian power in Kyrgyzstan. Instead, Russian power should be understood as seductive: pervasive but weak – and only ever present in concrete, situated relationships. Through exchange and association, and not least a mutually resonant 'myth of the state', it is implicated in producing the Kyrgyz 'state effect' and sometimes may be implicated in destabilizing it. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to infer a generalized weakening of sovereignty from Kyrgyz associations with Russia – on the contrary, these associations help produce 'sovereign excess' and thus secure the Kyrgyz state effect.

Russian entanglements with Kyrgyzstan also contribute to producing the Russian 'state effect', with its own ambivalent spatial logics. Russia's Great Power myth, like all post-Soviet myths of the state, is complex, combining specific historical legacies with evolving global meanings of Great Power status. The linear account of power as control over territory associated with spheres of influence is not at the core of the meaning of *derzhava* (Great Power) as sovereign independence of action currently reproduced in official Russian discourse or performances. And in the Russian myth of the state, spatial logics of (self-) exclusion co-exist with representations of openness of space. Closures of space tend to be triggered in particular interactions, often with an imagined space of the West – and even here, as Russian engagements with the US after the Osh conflict show, such exclusionary logics are part of particular contexts rather than a generalized phenomenon. They are not inevitably associated with a Russian Great Power myth.

It might be contended that we have simply been defining 21st century spheres of influence wrong – that in our globalized age, the return of spheres of influence must mean de-territorialized, spatially open relation-making. Obviously, the Westphalian imagination underpinning the concept does not capture the way the myth of the state

is reproduced (and productive) in a post-Westphalian world. But this suggestion overlooks the fact that the meaning of concepts – in particular of heavily politicized concepts such as sphere of influence – is not under the control of any one speaker and cannot simply be redefined at will.¹⁴⁹ Given the current state of relations between Russia and the West, the concept of sphere of influence remains politically active, normatively loaded and quite specific in the geopolitical imagination it conveys. In Western commentary, it is associated with the image of Russia as a ‘19th century power in a 21st century world’, the idea that Russia is reduced to seeking confirmation of Great Power status in a quest for spheres of influence precisely because it cannot adapt to an open, liberal world order defined by a very different geopolitical imagination.¹⁵⁰ Thinking in terms of spheres of influence obscures the way that Russian seductive power in Kyrgyzstan reflects the intersection of global ‘post-Westphalian’ trends, such as the scale of migration to Russia and the globally networked ‘offshore state’, with multiple Soviet and imperial legacies. It also essentializes a connection between a Russian ‘Great Power identity’ and a quest for spheres of influence that is historically contingent at best.

1 ‘Clinton Calls Eurasian Integration an Effort to Re-Sovietize’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Russia Report, 7/12/2012. Available from <http://www.rferl.org/a/clinton-calls-eurasian-integration-effort-toresovietize/24791921.html> (accessed 01/10/2017)

2 see e.g. K. Liik, ‘Introduction: Russia’s Pivot to Eurasia’, in K. Liik (ed.), *Russia’s Pivot to Eurasia*, (London: European Council on Foreign Relations 2014), E. Götz, ‘It’s geopolitics, stupid: explaining Russia’s Ukraine policy’, *Global Affairs*, 1/1 (2015), H. Smith ‘Statecraft and Post-Imperial Attractiveness: Eurasian Integration and Russia as a Great Power’, *Problems of Post-Communism* 63/3 (2016)

3 S. Hast, *Spheres of Influence in International Relations* (London: Ashgate 2014)

4 *ibid.*

5 J. Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge 2003);

6 *ibid.*; A. Osiander, ‘Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth’, *International Organization* 55/2 (2001)

7 e.g. J. Agnew, ‘The territorial trap: the geographical assumptions of international relations theory’

Review of international political economy 1/1 (1994): 53-80; T. Biersteker, and C. Weber. State sovereignty as social construct. (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); N. Brenner, B. Jessop, B., Jones, M. and Macleod, G. eds., State/space: a reader (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2008)

⁸ For examples see W.R Mead, 'The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers', *Foreign Affairs* 93, 2014, J.J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs* 93, 2014, R. Kagan, 'The weight of Geopolitics', *Journal of Democracy* 26/1 (2015): 21-31. For Mackinder as explicit analytical lens see for example Megoran, and S. Sharapova, eds. Central Asia in international relations: The legacies of Halford Mackinder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

⁹ J. Anderson, Kyrgyzstan: Central Asia's Island of Democracy? (Routledge: London 1999). M. Gessen, Putinspeak in Kyrgyzstan. New York Times Oct. 5, 2014, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/06/opinion/masha-gessen-putinspeak-in-kyrgyzstan.html> (accessed 12/09/16); A. Cooley and M. Laruelle, 'The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia: From Privileged Sphere to Divide and Rule?' PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 261, July 2013. Available from <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/changing-logic-russian-strategy-central-asia-privileged-sphere-divide-and-rule> (accessed 10/09/2016).

¹⁰ T. Mitchell, 'The limits of the state: beyond statist approaches and their critics', *American political science review* 85.01 (1991), pp. 77-96. See also A. Jeffrey, *The improvised state: sovereignty, performance and agency in Dayton Bosnia*. (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2012)

¹¹ The concept 'seductive power' was formulated by J. Allen, *Lost Geographies of Power* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2011)

¹² 36 narrative interviews conducted by the author in Bishkek in May 2013 (19 interviews), and July and October 2016 (17 interviews), i.e. before and after the closure of the US airbase at Manas and Kyrgyzstan's joining of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). All the interviewees were Kyrgyz nationals, though 5 people identified as ethnic Russian; 6 interviews were held in English and 30 in Russian. I'm grateful to all interviewees for sharing their insights and opinions and the sometimes considerable time they granted to the interviews. A reflection on the positionality of myself and my interviewees: I came to the question of Russian influence in Kyrgyzstan while teaching at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek a few years previously. As a female German national based at a small research university in the UK, both gender and identification as 'Western' (but not American) played out in the interview process. I had more access to individuals who were engaged in Western networks via NGOs and academic or political initiatives. While these interlocutors were, on the whole, more open than those who were not part of such networks, it was interesting to discover that their position within this space did not determine their position in relation to Russia. It also became clear throughout the project that gender dynamics played a role in the interview process, both in helping me to connect to the many women that I interviewed and in presenting challenges as some older men took a paternalistic position towards me as a researcher. Such dynamics suggest interesting lines of future inquiry into the construction of geopolitical knowledge in the region.

¹³ Hast (note 4), p. 10

¹⁴ Agnew (note 5); H. Vollaard, 'The logic of political territoriality' *Geopolitics* 14.4 (2009), p. 688

¹⁵ Agnew (note 5), pp. 75f.

¹⁶ Hast (note 4)

¹⁷ J. C. Hurewitz, *The Middle East and North Africa in World Politics: a documentary record* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1975), p. 538

¹⁸ T. Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso 2011), p. 47f

¹⁹ H.J. Mackinder 'The geographical pivot of history' *Royal Geographical Society*, 1904

²⁰ On Mackinder's ideas in the context of the time, see G. Kearns, *Geopolitics and Empire: The Legacy of Halford Mackinder* (Oxford: OUP 2009).

²¹ Hast (note 4), pp. 113ff

²² M. J. Shapiro, 'Representing World Politics: The Sport/War Intertext', in Der Derian, J. and Shapiro, M., *International/Intertextual Relations: Postmodern Readings of World Politics* (Massachusetts: Lexington Books 1989) pp. 69-96.

²³ For an influential early example, see Brezinski's reformulation of the Heartland thesis: Z. Brzezinski, *The grand chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997)

²⁴ For a critical overview of the 'New Great Game' trope, see M. Edwards 'The New Great Game and the New Great Gamers: Disciples of Kipling and Mackinder', *Central Asian Survey* 22/1 (2003), pp. 83-102. For explicit engagement in Central Asia, see N. Megoran and S. Shaparova, 'Introduction', as well as chapters by S. Shaparova and K. Nourzhanov in Megoran and Shaparova (note 8). See also S.

Matikeeva, 'Mackinders Legacy: was it a prophecy?' and other contributions in Central Asia and the Caucasus 4/34, 2005 (special issue on the Heartland thesis in Central Asia)

²⁵ eg. B. Dreyfuss, 'The Kyrgyz Great Game', *The Nation* 14/04/2010; J. Cote, 'As US Forces Leave Manas, the Great Game Stirs in Central Asia', *Geopolitical Monitor* 23/06/2014, available from <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/us-forces-leave-manas-great-game-stirs-central-asia/> (accessed 10/12/2017);

²⁶ For an extensive critical discussion of this narrative, see K. Toktomushev, 'Regime Security, Base Politics And Rent-Seeking: The Local And Global Political Economies Of The American Air Base In Kyrgyzstan, 2001–2010', *Central Asian Survey* 34.1 (2015), pp. 57-77. For examples of the Russian sphere-of-influence narrative see note 9. For narratives of geopolitical competition between Russia and China in CA, see eg. M. Duchatel et al., 'Eurasian integration: Caught between Russia and China', European Council on Foreign Relations, 7th June 2016, available from http://www.ecfr.eu/article/essay_eurasian (accessed 20/09/2017).

²⁷ See in particular A. Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: the New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford: OUP 2012), M. Edwards (note 25), K. Toktomushev (note 26)

²⁸ J. Agnew, 'Revisiting the Territorial Trap', *Nordia Geographical Publications* 44/4, p. 46

²⁹ Mitchell (note 9), pp. 89f

³⁰ M. Reeves, *Border work: Spatial lives of the state in rural Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); N. Koch, *The city and the steppe: Territory, technologies of government, and Kazakhstan's new capital* (PhD diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2012), p. 4

³¹ Cyrillic государственность; J. Heathershaw, 'Central Asian Statehood in Postcolonial Perspective', in E. Kawalski (ed.), *Stable Outside, Fragile Inside? Post-Soviet Statehood in Central Asia* (Farnham: Ashgate 2010),

³² *ibid.*, p. 87

³³ The term 'statespeople' is adapted from Y. Navaro-Yashin *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); for informal practices in post-Soviet Eurasia see e.g. S. Radnitz, 'Informal Politics and the State' *Comparative Politics* 43/3 (2011), H.E. Hale, *Patronal politics: Eurasian regime dynamics in comparative perspective* (Cambridge: CUP 2014);

³⁴ Reeves (note 30), p. 171

³⁵ *ibid.*; A. Doolotkueva, *Social mobilisations, politics and society in contemporary Kyrgyzstan* (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2015)

³⁶ J. Heathershaw and E. Schatz, 'Introduction: The Logics of State Weakness in Eurasia', in J. Heathershaw and E. Schatz (eds.), *Paradox of Power: The Logics of State Weakness in Eurasia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017)

³⁷ T.B. Hansen and F. Stepputat, 'Introduction', in Hansen and Stepputat (eds.) *States of Imagination: Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State* (Durham: Duke University Press 2001); L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity on Uzbekistan* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010); S. N. Cummings (ed.), *Symbolism and Power in Central Asia: Politics of the Spectacular* (London: Routledge, 2013)

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 5

³⁹ R. Koselleck, 'Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte', in: R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1979)

⁴⁰ Cyrillic самодержавие. O. Kharkhordin, 'What is the state? The Russian Concept of Gosudarstvo in the European Context' *History and Theory* 40/2 (2001), pp. 206-240.

⁴¹ R.G. Suny and T. Martin (eds.), *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: OUP, 2001)

⁴² R. Deyermund, *Security and Sovereignty in the Former Soviet Union* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008), p. 34

⁴³ M. Beissinger, 'Rethinking Empire in the Wake of Soviet Collapse', *Ab Imperio* 3/2005

⁴⁴ Koch (note 30), p. 16

⁴⁵ N. Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017)

⁴⁶ Cyrillic ближнее зарубежье. G. Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest Over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

⁴⁷ D. Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 63

⁴⁸ Cyrillic бескрайняя земля. E. Widdis, 'Russia as Space', in *National Identity in Russian Culture*. (Cambridge: CUP 2004), pp. 30-50. See also A.J. Rieber, 'Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay' in H. Ragsdale, and V. N. Ponomarev, *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy*

(Cambridge: CUP1993);

⁴⁹ As Madeleine Reeves observes, for inhabitants of villages around Batken in the Ferhgana valley, 'going to town' no longer means Batken – it means Moscow. See M. Reeves, 'Black Work, Green Money: Remittances, Ritual and Domestic Economies in Southern Kyrgyzstan', *Slavic Review* 71/1 (2012), p. 108

⁵⁰ Cyrillic наши, губерния. Interviews with Kyrgyz Human Rights activist, 18/07/2017 (translated from Russian by the author), Kyrgyz UN employee, 12/10/2017 (translated from Russian by the author), Kyrgyz democratic activist 12/20/2017 (translated from Russian by the author).

⁵¹ D. Lewis, 'Reasserting Hegemony In Central Asia: Russian Policy In Post-2010 Kyrgyzstan', *Comillas Journal of International Relations*, 2/3 2015, pp.58-80

⁵² Interview with Kyrgyz head of think tank, 2/05/2013.

⁵³ M. Foucault 'The Subject and Power', in H Dreyfus and P. Rabinov *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (London: Wheatsheaf, 1982) pp. 208-226

⁵⁴ Allen (note 9), p. 63

⁵⁵ *ibid.* p. 183

⁵⁶ *ibid.* p. 103

⁵⁷ Massey (note 33), pp. 68, 100

⁵⁸ Cooley (note 27); J. Engvall, 'The State as Investment Market: A Framework for Interpreting the Post-Soviet State in Eurasia', *Governance* 28.1 (2015), pp. 25-40.

⁵⁹ Lewis (note 36), Toktomushev (note 26)

⁶⁰ "Amid Russian downturn, Kyrgyzstan turns to China", *The Diplomat*, 14/10/2016.

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/amid-russian-downturn-kyrgyzstan-turns-to-china/> (accessed 02/10/2016). A current example is the \$500mio Kyrgyz-Russian development fund that was founded in 2014 to prepare the Kyrgyz economy for EEU accession and finally became active in 2016. See D. Esenaliev and G. Asylbek kyzy, Eurasian Economic Union policies and practices in Kyrgyzstan, *SIPRI commentary* 16/06/2017, available from <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2017/eurasian-economic-union-policies-and-practice-kyrgyzstan> (accessed 23/10/2017)

^{61A} Cooley and J. Heathershaw, *Dictators without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2017)

⁶² *ibid.*, Toktomushev (note 26) and J. Tierny, 'Mystery at Manas: Strategic Blind Spots in the Department of Defence Fuel Contracts in Kyrgyzstan', *U.S. House of Representatives Report* 12/2010, available from

http://psm.du.edu/media/documents/congressional_comm/house_oversight_gov_reform/us_hosue_oversight_manas.pdf (accessed 17/10/2017)

⁶³ Eg. C. Michael, 'Kyrgyzstan: A Reluctant Accession to the EEU', *The Diplomat* 21/11/2014, available from <https://thediplomat.com/2014/11/kyrgyzstan-to-reluctantly-join-the-eeu/> (accessed 01/11/2017)

⁶⁴ N. Djanbekova, 'Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan Impasse Remains Despite Talks', *Eurasianet.org* 26/10/2017, available from <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/85721> (accessed 2/11/2017); T. Toktonaliev, 'Tensions Build Between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan', *IWPR Global Voices Central Asia*, 26/10/2017, available from <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tensions-build-between-kyrgyzstan-and> (accessed 2/11/2017). For an overview of the Kyrgyz experience in the EEU to date, see D. Esenaliev and G. Asylbek kyzy (note 62).

⁶⁵ Eg. 'Economic Consequences of Kyrgyzstan's Accession to the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia: an Impact Analysis', *National Institute for Strategic Studies of the Kyrgyz Republic Report*, Bishkek 2012. This was also the assessment of experts I interviewed, eg. interview with Kyrgyz economist, 9/5/2013, with Kyrgyz economist and head of trade body, 15/5/2013, Kyrgyz think tank expert, 18/07/2016, head of think tank 11/10/2016, Kyrgyz academics, 19/07/2016 and 10/10/2016.

⁶⁶ Foreign trade with Russia in 2016 amounts to 40% of overall trade volume once the income from the Kumtor Goldmine is omitted. See 'In 2016 trade turnover between Kyrgyzstan and Russia amounted to more than \$ 1 bln', *Kabar.kg news*, available from <http://kabar.kg/eng/news/in-2016-trade-turnover-between-kyrgyzstan-and-russia-amounted-to-more-than-1-bln/> (accessed 3/11/2017).

Current figures for trade and remittances are available from the Kyrgyz Central Bank, <http://nbkr.kg/index1.jsp?item=2007&lang=ENG> (accessed 28/10/2017) and World Bank <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=KG> (accessed 28/10/2017)

⁶⁷ "Hope and Fear: Kyrgyz Migrants in Russia", *IRIN News*, 24/04/2015, available from <http://www.irinnews.org/report/101398/hope-and-fear-kyrgyz-migrants-russia> (accessed 16/10/2016); 'Kyrgyzstan: foreign remittance with labour migration up', *Times of Central Asia*, 30/07/2016

68 See IRI poll http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-09-25_survey_of_kyrgyz_public_opinion_july_22-31_2015.pdf

69 I'm grateful to Oleg Korneev for pointing out this last issue. 'Blacklisting' means expelling Kyrgyz migrants from Russia and blocking their legal return for a number of years (thus perhaps pushing them into illegal migration).

70 Income from remittances briefly dipped after 2014, but has now recovered. See also 'Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan greatly dependent on migrant labor', *Eurasianews* 29/05/2017, available from <http://eurasianews.info/en/important/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-greatly-dependent-on-migrant-labor.html> (accessed 3/11/2017)

71 Interview with Kyrgyz think tank expert, 18/07/2016 and human rights activist, 12/10/2016. Moscow facilitated the acquisition of citizenship for Russian-speakers in 2014, even before Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU, and dual citizenship is allowed. The experience of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia is not always positive, given the conditions of illegal migrants and the rise of xenophobia against immigrants in metropolitan Russia. However, this does not preclude the blurring of affective geographies. Cf. Reeves (note 48)

72 Interviews with Kyrgyz human rights activist, 12/10/2016, Kyrgyz academic 19/07/2016

73 C. Rickleton, 'Kyrgyzstan: Russian 'Information Wars' Heating Up', *Eurasianet.org* 16/04/2014, available from <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68280> (accessed 28/10/2017)

74 'Russia's narrative finds an audience in Central Asia', *The Diplomat* 28/04/2015, available from <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/russias-narrative-finds-an-audience-in-central-asia/> (accessed 17/10/2016).

75 Interviews with Kyrgyz academics, 19/07/2016 and 10/10/2016, Kyrgyz head of think tank 10/10/2016, Kyrgyz Human Rights activist 12/10/2016

76 Adams (note 36); Koch (note 30); Kharkhordin (note 39)

77 E. Marat, 'Kyrgyzstan: a parliamentary system based on inter-elite consensus' *Demokratizatsiya* 20/4 (2012)

78 M. Fumagalli, 'Semi-presidentialism in Kyrgyzstan' in R. Elgie and S. Mostrup, *Semi-Presidentialism in the Caucasus and Central Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). pp. 173-205. After Atambaev stepped down in 2017, his chosen successor won the elections, amid allegations of electoral irregularities. Cf. 'Kyrgyzstan: Report Shows Presidential Candidate Gained Access to Private Data', *Eurasianet.org*, 27/10/2017, available from <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/85731> (accessed 10/11/2017)

79 Interviews in 2016 in particular. N. Megoran, 'Shared space, divided space: narrating ethnic histories of Osh', *Environment and Planning A* (45/20130), pp. 892 – 907

80 This is a contentious issue: Not among my interviewees, but in wider societal (nationalist) discourse, the Uzbek minority was blamed for this fragile state-ness, while Uzbeks were vocally protesting against what they saw as a corrupt and inequitable state. Cf A. Маннапов 'нельзя путать защитницу с правозащитницей', *Centrasia News* 10/12/2010, available from <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1291929120> (accessed 20/10/17); И. Лукашов, 'Ситуация на Юге Кыргызстана: Найти общий язык', *Ferghana.ru*, 11/06/2010, available from <http://www.ferghananews.com/articles/6605> (accessed 09/11/2017); N. Megoran, 'Averting Violence in Kyrgyzstan: Understanding and Responding to Nationalism', Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme Paper 2012/03 (London: Chatham House, 2012)

81 Megoran (note 44); Reeves (note 30); on Osh see Megoran (note 75)

82 M. Reeves, 'Materialising State Space: 'Creeping Migration' and Territorial Integrity in Southern Kyrgyzstan', *Europe-Asia Studies* 61/7 (2009), pp. 1277-1313; C. Rickleton, 'Kyrgyzstan: Property Rights Struggles Muddy Issyk-Kul's Waters', *eurasianet.org*, 19/06/2012, available from <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65569> (accessed 30/10/2017)

83 A. Karagulova and N. Megoran, 'Discourses of danger and the 'war on terror': gothic Kyrgyzstan and the collapse of the Akaev regime', *Review of International Studies*, 36, 2010, p. 3

84 M. Laruelle, 'The Paradigm of Nationalism in Kyrgyzstan. Evolving Narrative, the Sovereignty Issue, and Political Agenda', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 45/1 (2012), p. 43; on the 'meddling' of NGOs after Osh, see D. Gullette, and J. Heathershaw, 'The Affective Politics Of Sovereignty: Reflecting On The 2010 Conflict In Kyrgyzstan' *Nationalities papers* 43/1 (2015), pp.122-139

85 eg interview with Atambaev, in 'Kyrgyzstan: Democracy under Pressure', *Financial Times* 13 June 2014; interviews with a Kyrgyz businessman, 4/5/2013, Kyrgyz head of think tank, 2/5/2013.

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- ⁸⁶ A. Matveeva, 'Violence in Kyrgyzstan, Vacuum in the Region, LSE Civil Society & Human Security Research Unit Working Paper December 2011/WP 02.11; 'Why Isn't Russia Intervening in Kyrgyzstan?', *Time* magazine, 16/06/2010
- ⁸⁷ Interview with Kyrgyz human rights activist, 12/10/2016 (translation from Russian by the author)
- ⁸⁸ Sebastian Peyrose, 'Kyrgyzstan's Membership in the Eurasian Economic Union: A Marriage of Convenience?' *Russian Analytical Digest* 165/17 March 2015, p. 12
- ⁸⁹ Lewis (note 36). Interviews with Kyrgyz head of think tank, 2/5/2013, Kyrgyz political analyst 10/10/2016
- ⁹⁰ interviews with Kyrgyz MP and businessman, 19/07/2016 and Kyrgyz Human Rights activist, 5/10/2016.
- ⁹¹ Eg. M. Gessen, 'Putinspeak in Krygyzstan', *New York Times*, 5/10/2014
- ⁹² interviews with Kyrgyz MP, 14/05/2013, Kyrgyz MP and businessman, 19/07/2016 and Kyrgyz Human Rights activist, 5/10/2016.
- ⁹³ Thanks to Bakhytzhann Kurmanov for first pointing this out to me.
- ⁹⁴ Eg. 'Киргизия как полигон соперничества России и США', *For.kg news site*, available from <http://www.for.kg/ru/news/119341/> (accessed 28/10/2017). There is a negative version of this conspiracy theory of all-pervasive Russian control over the 2010 events, which I heard from Western-leaning political activists and businesspeople, eg. interview with businessman 4/5/2013, interview with NGO activist 3/5/2017. However, I also was told this story in positive affective registers, as expression of Russian dissatisfaction with a bad, criminal president, eg. interview with businessman, 13/5/2013, interview with Kyrgyz UN employee 12/10/2016. Beyond the metropolitan elites, 'positive' CTs seem to be common (interview with human rights activist, 12/10/2016)
- ⁹⁵ This particular conspiracy theory seems to have been prominent after Osh, though I only heard about it in 2016; many interviewees in 2016 knew this story.
- ⁹⁶ All interviewees in 2016 were familiar with this trope, and many had heard it personally in their wider circle. Asel Doolotkieva kindly shared fieldwork in Osh and Chui province, where these interpellations were common. The popularity of these circulating tropes are also underpinned by opinion poll data. Cf. "Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Full of Putin Fans, New Poll Says", *Eurasianet* 11/08/2014, available from <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69471> (accessed 20/08/2016)
- ⁹⁷ cf also 'Interview with Valentin Bogatyrev', *fergananews.com* 19/10/2016, available from <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=9127> (accessed 19/10/2016)
- ⁹⁸ eg "Almazbek Atambaev to Putin: I am always glad to see you, because when I see you, it is as if I see a brother" (in Russian), *Kyrgyzstan segodnja*, 17/09/2016, available from www.kyrgyztoday.com (accessed 12/10/2016)
- ⁹⁹ Interview with Kyrgyz MPs, 30/4/2013, 18/07/2016, human rights activist, 12/10/2016. See also A. Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence: Russia in Central Asia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment Press, 2013), p. 137
- ¹⁰⁰ Interview with Kyrgyz businessman and politician, 19/7/2016. See also Г. Михайлов, 'билборды с путиним в киргизии запрещены', *Независимая Газета* 27/7/2011
- ¹⁰¹ R. Allison, 'Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Regime Security in Central Asia' *Central Asian Survey* 27/2 (2008), pp.185-202.
- ¹⁰² J.D. Sidaway, 'Sovereign excesses? Portraying post-colonial sovereigntyscapes', *Political Geography* 22 (2003), pp. 157-178
- ¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 159ff and J.D. Sidaway, *Imagined Regional Communities: Integration and Sovereignty in the Global South* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- ¹⁰⁴ There is evidence that Maxim Bakiev's corruption, and collusion with corrupt Russian and US business networks, was a greater concern at that particular point and that the downfall of Bakiev was an unintended consequence. Cf Toktomushev (note 26), p. 58f
- ¹⁰⁵ E. Marat, 'Global Money Laundering and its Domestic Political Consequences in Kyrgyzstan' *Central Asian Survey* 34/1 (2015), p. 47
- ¹⁰⁶ Toktomushev (note 26)
- ¹⁰⁷ Cooley (note 27)
- ¹⁰⁸ C. Rickleton, *Kyrgyzstan: China's Economic Influence Fostering Resentment*, *Eurasianet.org* 28/4/2011, available from <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63383> (accessed 2/12/2017)
- ¹⁰⁹ Cooley (note 27), p. 123ff
- ¹¹⁰ 'Kyrgyz opposition leaders doubt legitimacy of referendum result', *Deutsche Welle*, 28/06/10, available from <http://www.dw.com/en/kyrgyz-opposition-leaders-doubt-legitimacy-of-referendum-result/a-5738075> (accessed 19/10/2016)

- 111 'Kyrgyz Lawmakers Reject Controversial NGO Law', RFE/RL Newswire, 12/6/2016, available from <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-controversial-ngo-law-rejected/27731213.html> (accessed 20/10/2017)
- 112 interview with Kyrgyz political scientist, 12/10/2016
- 113 Interview with Elmira Nogoibaeva, 13/10/2016. See also Z. Sydykova 'Commemorating the 1916 Massacres in Kyrgyzstan? Russia Sees a Western Plot', The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 20/01/2016, available from <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13325-commemorating-the-1916-massacres-in-kyrgyzstan?-russia-sees-a-western-plot.html> (accessed 20/10/2017)
- 114 Interview with Kyrgyz young professional, 7/10/2016, human rights activist 12/10/2017
- 115 Interviews with Kyrgyz academics, 10/10/2016, Kyrgyz young professional 7/10/2016.
- 116 On the internationalization of Kyrgyz universities, see J. Shadymanova and S. Amsler, 'Higher Education reform and the landscape diversity of higher education institutions in Kyrgyzstan' in 25 years of transformations of higher education systems in post-Soviet countries: reform and continuity (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)
- 117 Cooley (note 27), p. 8f.
- 118 S. Lukes, 'Power: A Radical View (2nd)' (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan 2005), p. 69
- 119 'U.S. Ambassador To Kyrgyzstan Warns Of Russian Influence', RFE/RL 31/10/2014, available from <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-united-states-russia-spratlen/26667847.html> (accessed 20/10/2017)
- 120 E. Schatz, Slow Burn: Symbolic America and Social Movements in Central Asia (manuscript in progress)
- 121 Lewis (note 36). Most interviewees both in 2013 and 2016 confirmed this.
- 122 Quoted in Lewis (note 36), p. 15. My interviewees agreed that the funding of candidates was ineffective. Some interviewees pointed out that the Kremlin tends to spread its handouts around, rather than backing a favourite – more evidence perhaps of the limited effectiveness of this kind of 'statecraft'. Interviews with Kyrgyz head of think tank, 2/5/2013, Kyrgyz political analyst 10/10/2016, Kyrgyz businessman and politician, 19/7/2016.
- 123 Thanks to Asel Doolotkiewa for this information.
- 124 E. Troitsky, 'Turmoil in Kyrgyzstan: a challenge to Russian foreign policy', UI Occasional Papers, 8/2012 (Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2012), p. 15
- 125 cf note 1, 2 and 26. See also F. S. Starr and S. E. Cornell, (eds.) Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and its discontents, (eds), Silkroad Papers and Monographs, 2014; most recently M. Kaczmarek, 'Two Ways of Influence-building: The Eurasian Economic Union and the One Belt, One Road Initiative' Europe-Asia Studies 69/7 (2017): 1027-1046
- 126 F. Linde, 'The Civilizational Turn in Russian Political Discourse: From Pan-Europeanism to Civilizational Distinctiveness', The Russian Review 75/4 (2016), pp. 604-625.
- 127 Cyrillic Русский Мир. M. Laruelle, The Russian World: Russian Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination, (Washington, DC: CGI 2015)
- 128 Putin's speech at the St Petersburg economic forum June 2016, available in English from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178> (accessed 23/11/2017) - while Putin mentions Soviet legacies, this speech, like other statements on the issue, mainly referenced liberal tropes (cf. note 137)
- 129 Cyrillic сфера привилегированного интереса. D. Trenin 'Russia's spheres of interest, not influence' The Washington Quarterly 32/4 (2009), pp. 3-22. There are statements warning of the creation of 'spheres of influence', directed at the West, eg. foreign minister Sergei Lavrov's speech to the Munich security conference in 2010, available from <https://www.securityconference.de/en/activities/munich-security-conference/msc-2010/speeches/lavrov-sergey/> (accessed 10/12/2017)
- 130 Laruelle (note 123), p. 1. See also M.Y. Omelicheva, 'Critical geopolitics on Russian foreign policy: uncovering the imagery of Moscow's international relations', International Politics (online 22 Sept. 2016), pp. 1-19.
- 131 Cyrillic держава, державность. A. Tsygankov, The Strong State in Russia (Oxford: OUP 2014)
- 132 Cyrillic самостоятельность; *ibid*, p. 42; S. Ortmann 'The post-Soviet myth of the strong state in Russia', in Heathershaw and Schatz (note 35)
- 133 Agnew (note 5), p. 76ff.
- 134 D. Wilson 'Dreaming with BRICs: the path to 2050', Goldman Sachs Investment Report, 2003, available from <http://www.goldmansachs.com/our-thinking/archive/brics-dream.html> (accessed 22/10/2017)

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- 135 M. Liu, 'BRICS development: a long way to a powerful economic club and new international organization' *The Pacific Review* 29/3 (2016), pp. 443-453.
- 136 R. Sakwa, 'How the Eurasian elites envisage the role of the EEU in global perspective', *European Politics and Society* 17/sup1 (2016), pp. 4-22.
- 137 V. Putin, 'Новый интеграционный проект для Евразии — будущее, которое рождается сегодня' *Известия* 3/10/2011, p. 1, available at <http://izvestia.ru/news/502761> (accessed 26/09/2016)
- 138 The choice between the EEU and the accession agreement need not have been mutually exclusive, but became so – because of the intransigence of the EU commission on the one hand and the Kremlin's gamble that they could cajole Yanukovich into the EEU on the other. See S. Charap, and T.J. Colton. *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2017)
- 139 Sakwa (note 129); For examples see Putin's speech at the St Petersburg economic forum 2016, Пленарное заседание Петербургского международного экономического форума, 17 June 2016, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52178> (accessed 23/10/2017), 'Interview: Tigran Sargsyan on the Eurasian Economic Union', *The Diplomat* 18/10/2017, available from <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/interview-tigran-sargsyan-on-the-eurasian-economic-union/> (accessed 23/10/2017);
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